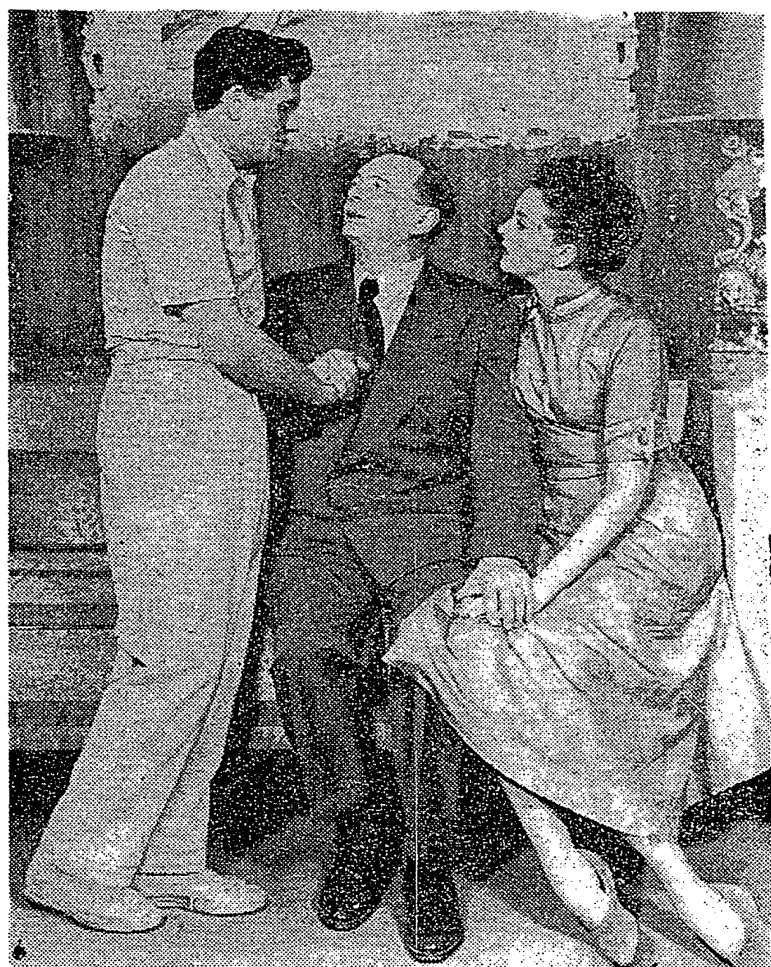


AT THE THEATRE



"I don't have to play ball any more."—Reinhold Schunzel (center) who impersonates a Hollywood agent, gives his opinion of a film tycoon to John Garfield and Nancy Kelly.

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Since Clifford Odets feels deeply about nearly everything, "The Big Knife" fairly snaps with emotion. Mr. Odets says that Hollywood is an evil place. With John Garfield at the head of an enthralling group of players, "The Big Knife" opened up the National Theatre last evening, and Mr. Odets revealed some of Hollywood's most monstrous abominations.

This column dislikes being found wanting in a good moral crusade. But the characters in "The Big Knife" are not worth so much of Mr. Odets' indignation on so cosmic a plane. As in a soundly motivated melodrama, they get what they deserve in the last act. There is no point in crying doom for the entire nation.

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To Mr. Odets' "The Big Knife" seems to be a study of the immorality of success measured solely in terms of money; and he is showing how the conspiracy of money destroys those who work for it. A colossal star who began as an idealist faces a dilemma. His wife, who is disillusioned by the man he has become, threatens to leave him if he signs a contract for fourteen more years in Hollywood. If he does not sign, his studio, which needs him, will turn him over to the police for a crime his bosses have managed to conceal by bribery and paying blackmail. The star signs. Mr. Odets proceeds to show how one crime gets piled on another until everyone is corrupted and the whole edifice topples over in a crash of scandal and disaster.

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He is not content to play it straight. Always a vivid writer, he has put together a whole company of authentic individual people, characterizing them brilliantly and displaying them in a series of actable scenes. Although Mr. Odets has a fondness for purple passages, his characters are living people, and what they do and most of what they say in individual scenes are both plausible and electric.

But Mr. Odets is more effective with individual scenes than with the play as a whole for two reasons. In the first place, he refuses to construct his play simply. He writes in picturesque circumlocutions all around his theme, bouncing startling phrases off it but seldom coming to the point. The drama coyly dawdles on one foot or the other, and declines to march straight forward until well into the last act.

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In the second place, Mr. Odets ascribes more significance to his drama than his characters can sustain. To him this Hollywood jangle is a great moral tragedy, and he quotes one or two fancy phrases to prove it. But his characters are

The Cast

THE BIG KNIFE, a play by Clifford Odets. Staged by Lee Strasberg; scenery by Howard Bay; costumes by Lucille Little; produced by Dwight Deere Wiman. At the National Theatre.

Russell	.....	Frank Wilson
Buddy Bliss	.....	William Terry
Charlie Castle	.....	John Garfield
Patty Benedict	.....	Leona Powers
Marlon Castle	.....	Nancy Kelly
Nat Danziger	.....	Reinhold Schunzel
Marcus Hoff	.....	J. Edward Bromberg
Smiley Coy	.....	Paul McGrath
Connie Bliss	.....	Mary Patton
Hank Teagle	.....	Theodore Newton
Dixie Evans	.....	Joan McCracken
Dr. Frary	.....	John McKee

a singularly undistinguished and unattractive society of egotists, racketeers, cheats and dimwits. It is impossible to be harrowed when they knock themselves and each other out. It could happen just as logically in the first act as the last.

In honor of the performance, this report will be more cheerful. For Lee Strasberg, working in a minor key, has designed a beautiful performance that has spontaneity and tension at the same time. Although he does not force it, it is never colorless or tepid.

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As the troubled star, Mr. Garfield gives an interestingly moody performance that can be tremendously powerful at the crucial moment. J. Edward Bromberg plays the charlatan producer with considerable insight into the part. Although the producer is fatuous, he is also shrewd and smart. There is a pleasantly loyal and paternal agent by Reinhold Schunzel. Paul McGrath as an unctuous crook, Theodore Newton as a gentlemanly writer, William Terry as an affable but futile friend, Frank Wilson as a kindly servant and John McKee as a slightly acerbic doctor from next door—all give excellent performances.

The women's parts are well played also. As the star's bewildered wife, Nancy Kelly brings a soft and somber beauty into a slimy environment. Joan McCracken skillfully acts a star-dazzled trollope, and Mary Patton is agreeably alluring as a neighborly adulteress. Leona Powers begins the story with a chilling portrait of a gossip columnist.

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Like the acting, the production is admirable work. Howard Bay's sketch of an imposing basement rumpus room is massive enough to convey the ominous note in the drama. And Lucille Little's costumes are brightly contrived. There is a lot of distinguished art and craftsmanship in "The Big Knife." In its characters and episodes it is a cheering reminder of Mr. Odets' uncommon theatre talents.

But as Emerson remarked on looking at the stars: "Why so hot, little man?" Under the stress of fiery emotions, Mr. Odets has overreached himself.

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